

HURTGEN FOREST to the ROER



The month of fighting in the Hurtgen Forest and on the approaches to the Roer River was the most bitter the men of the 5th Armd. Div. ever knew. Fighting in impossible terrain, the division's tanks and halftracks could neither maneuver nor deploy. Tied down by the terrain and thousands of mines, the tankers and infantrymen fought a hacking, yard by yard battle.

The men lived in mud and rain and freezing cold. They were constantly exposed to tremendous concentrations of enemy fire. Artillery bursting in the thick pine trees, thickly sown mines and snipers sent casualties soaring. Dead and wounded streamed back to the rear 24 hours a day in endless procession.

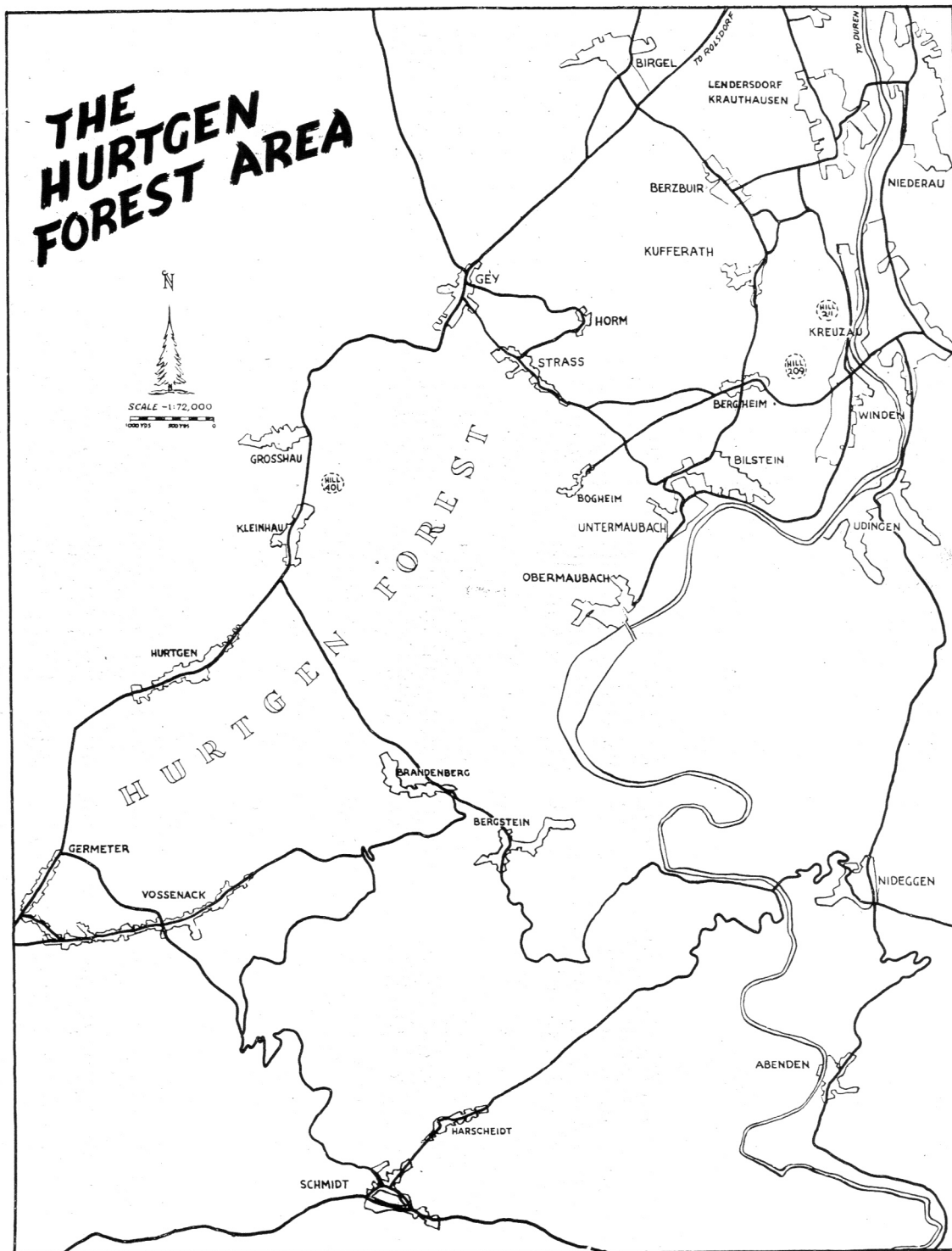
This month of combat was cruel and heartbreaking for the men, but the month's fighting snapped something in the German Army. Nowhere, ever again, did the Germans fight with the tenacious ferocity they displayed in Hurtgen and on the banks of the Roer.

CC R was the first combat command to get into the fight. Taken from under division control and operating directly under V Corps, the command fought toward Hurtgen, then took the towns of Kleinhau, Brandenburg and Bergstein.

Later in the month, a few miles to the north and toward the Roer, CC A attacked through Gey, Horm and Kufferath to the banks of the river. At the same time CC B also attacked to the Roer through the towns of Langenbroich, Bergheim and Bilstein.

Pulled out of the Hurtgen and Roer area, the division helped form the northern block to prevent the Germans from turning the army's flank during the battle of the "Bulge."

In January CC A was sent on a special mission to take the town of Eicherschied in the Siegfried Line and to clear the surrounding area. It was the division's first mission under the Ninth Army, to which the 5th Armored was assigned after serving for five months with the First Army.



COMBAT COMMAND R



The night of Nov. 24, 1944, was cold, black and rainy. At 2100 that night Combat Command R started into the Hurtgen Forest. The mission was to take the German town of Hurtgen. The 95th Armored Field Artillery Bn. had gone into position five days earlier. First company to move was B Co. of the 47th Armored Infantry Bn., part of Task Force Boyer. The infantrymen moved out of Roetgen in their halftracks, leaving their married B Co. of the 10th Tank Bn. behind. Too great a concentration of armor, it was felt, would attract heavy artillery fire. The plan for the attack called for two companies,

B Co. of the 47th and of the 10th, to meet on the road between Germeter and Hurtgen and jump off in married formation for the attack.

At 2400 B Co. of the 10th left Roetgen and moved toward its designated area on the road. When the infantry company arrived, the men jumped from their halftracks and sought cover in the basements, for heavy artillery was already falling around them.

Marching in a column of twos, the infantry company moved out at 0530 toward the front lines between Germeter and Hurtgen. Rain and snow slanted through the pine trees, turning the muddy roads into quagmires, making their march a step-by-step struggle. The company was led by an 8th Inf. Div. guide, one of the 22 men left of his company, and was to follow a path marked with white engineer tape. The heavy artillery and stormy weather had long since removed this marker and the company walked in the heavily mined forest without a marked passage. The Germans had sown the area heavily with schu and anti-personnel mines and almost immediately explosions and cries for "Medics!" filled the forest. At dawn the Germans began to pour in more and more artillery. Small arms fire increased.

Casualties skyrocketed, and when the tanks arrived at the jump-off point at their scheduled time, 0730, the infantry company was badly battered.

On the road between Germeter and Hurtgen, an 8th Inf. Div. light tank had struck a mine, blocking the road. A tank retriever went forward to remove it, but the retriever, too, hit a mine and was disabled. An effort was made to dynamite the light tank off the road, but this caused a large crater which made as formidable an obstacle as the disabled tank.

Despite the cratered road and the heavy casualties already suffered by the infantry company, the attack started at 0730. The tanks lurched toward Hurtgen, with Lt. Jack McAuley leading. McAuley's tank neared the crater and he called back on the radio, "I'm going to try to jump the damned thing." His tank gathered speed, roared up the soupy road, his tracks throwing a brown spray of mud to the rear. At the crater's edge the driver put on one final burst of speed, but the crater was too wide. The tank slammed into the crater's side, rolled to the left and lay half on its side, but it was in perfect defilade. McAuley could fire his 75 only by using his elevating mechanism to traverse and his traversing mechanism to elevate. From this position, the officer and his gunner, Cpl. William S. Hibler, fired round after round into enemy positions. The 95th Artillery and Lt. James M. McFadden's 47th Assault Gun Platoon continued pounding the Germans in Hurtgen. B Co. of the 10th had already lost three tank commanders to snipers who were firing from the woods on the left.

Engineers were called up to bridge the crater so the column could slip around McAuley's tank and push on to Hurtgen. Capt. Charles Perlman, commander of C Co., 22nd Engineers, came up to assist the engineers, was wounded and was evacuated. Heavy artillery and mortar fire rained on the engineers as they worked. Capt. Frank M. Pool, B Co., 10th, commander, was hit by a German burp gun while standing in his turret directing the bridging operations, but refused to be evacuated. He climbed out of his tank to help the engineers and while on the ground was wounded again, this time by mortar fire. He again refused to be evacuated, but was soon so weak from loss of blood that evacuation was necessary. Lt. Lewis R. Rollins took over the company.

By 1030, working under heavy fire, the engineers had bridged the crater. Lt. McAuley ordered Sgt. William Hurley to move his tank over the span so he could fire on the right flank and protect the column, but Hurley's tank hit a mine, again blocking the road. While carrying out these orders, Sgt. Hurley was wounded by sniper fire and was evacuated.

Then S/Sgt. Lawrence Summerfield, who was later given a battlefield commission, managed to snake his tank around the other two disabled Shermans and almost to the bend in the road which led into Hurtgen. Just as his tank pulled up to the corner, a German anti-tank gun, which had been zeroed on the corner, fired at him and missed. As the shots zoomed by Summerfield's tank, his gunner, Cpl. Benny R. Majka, knocked out the German gun with one round from his 75. Just then another German gun opened fire on Summerfield's tank, knocking it out.

By now it was 1400. P-47's came over to bomb and strafe enemy positions in Hurtgen.

At this time Capt. Richard Lewis' B Co., 47th, had only 80 men left out of 225. Mines, snipers and artillery had almost wiped out the company. The Anti-Tank Platoon was brought up to serve as litter bearers and emergency aid men, for although the medics worked fast, they found it impossible to care for all the rapidly mounting casualties.

The Anti-Tank Platoon worked unceasingly, treating and evacuating the wounded men. Sgt. Lyndall Mailes and Pfc. Charles M. Drake made trip after trip over the heavily mined ground to evacuate wounded men.

Pfc. Leonard Tanis, B Co., 47th, noticed that the snipers and artillery seemed to have a working agreement. The crack of a sniper's rifle was frequently followed by an artillery concentration. Wriggling forward to a position from which he could observe, Tanis used his M-1 to kill a sniper who was also directing artillery.

By now Capt. Leo R. Marcikowski's C Co., 47th, had been brought up and was

Attack to Kleinhau

trying to flank through the woods to the left of the road. The mines and artillery quickly took heavy toll and in 15 minutes 50 C Co. men lay wounded on the ground. Their progress was also slowed by Germans firing American machine guns from positions that were supposed to be in American hands. Both infantry companies were by now almost exhausted, even before they had come into close contact with the enemy. The Germans had booby-trapped every ditch and foxhole, and when the men flopped into a hole to avoid the artillery they were blown up by these mines.

It was impossible to employ the tanks or use the heavy infantry weapons. It was a hopeless job to continue the attack. Late that night Col. Anderson told Col. Boyer to pull his task force out.

Meanwhile, Task Force Hamberg, the married A and C Cos., had been living in the mud and muck just north of Germeter. They stayed there for the next three days under heavy shelling while the 8th Infantry, after paying a terrible price, finally took Hurtgen. On the morning of Nov. 29 Task Force Hamberg moved through the 8th Inf. Div. to attack Kleinhau. The married C Cos. led the attack, moving up the road between Hurtgen and Kleinhau.

Lt. Robert Leas' 1st Platoon of C Co. tanks swung to the left off the road to provide flank protection and four tanks were immediately stuck in the deep, thick mud. The 2nd Tank Platoon, under Lt. T. A. Maguire, went straight up the road toward Kleinhau, followed by Lt. George Kleinsteiber's 3rd Platoon. A 2nd Platoon tank section under S/Sgt. Edwin Gordon was detached and also sent to the left flank. While he was in an exposed position under heavy fire, Gordon was called on the radio and told he could pull out if fire became too heavy. He preferred to stick at his job. He was later shot by a sniper and was evacuated.

By 1000 at least one platoon of tanks had bulled its way into Kleinhau. The 95th Artillery continued to pound the Germans during the attack, with Lt. Howard K. Kettlehut going far forward to observe and direct the fire.

At the time the married C Cos. were fighting their way into Kleinhau, the married A Cos. were following them up the road and through the fields to the left of the road.

Lt. William Drennen's platoon led the A Co. attack. It swung to the left off the road and around C Co.'s tanks mired in the mud. Capt. Arthur N. Whitley, A Co. commander, was up with the leading tank platoon. Artillery rained on and around the tanks, for the Germans had direct observation and plastered the area with all their artillery to stop the attack.

Drennen continued to work to the left toward Kleinhau and Lt. Joseph Cardone's platoon ploughed straight for Kleinhau. Cardone arrived in Kleinhau with three of his five tanks. One was knocked out by direct fire and the other received a direct hit in the turret with a German mortar. By 1430 Capt. Whitley's company was in Kleinhau in support of C Co.

Again the two supporting infantry companies were fighting a losing battle with mines, artillery and snipers, trying to keep pace with the tanks.

Capt. Joe M. Beisenstein's A Co., 47th, pushed toward Kleinhau, working to the left of the Hurtgen-Kleinhau road. Capt. Beisenstein was twice wounded and twice refused evacuation. He continued to lead his company until he was killed by a German artillery shell during the attack.

By early afternoon both infantry companies had broken through to Kleinhau and helped the tanks outpost the town.

At 1800 that night Capt. Francis J. Baum was mortally wounded by a direct artillery hit in his tank. Capt. Baum had gotten out of his tank to check each of his platoons' positions, and had just climbed back into his turret when the artillery shell landed on his tank. He died a short time later in the battalion aid station.

That night, Nov. 29, the 8th Inf. Div. moved into Kleinhau to relieve the two heavily hit 47th Inf. companies. The tanks stayed in the town until the next afternoon, and then pulled out of Kleinhau into a woods west of the town. Artillery and mortars continued to fall steadily.

During all of this action the 95th Artillery continued to blast German positions with counter-battery and support fire.

Task Force Hamberg stayed in the woods west of Kleinhau until it received orders on Dec. 1 to take the town of Brandenburg, three miles south of Kleinhau. It was the start of another bitter, cruel fight against mines, artillery and the ever-present German snipers.

At 0700 Dec. 2, Col. Hamberg's forces jumped off, A Cos. leading, Lt. Kenneth Wagner's 2nd Platoon in front. The platoon swung to the right of the road to avoid mines, but almost immediately Wagner's tank struck a mine and was put of action. Wagner ordered the crew to abandon the tank, and then walked back to the platoon behind him to tell them about the minefield. Lt. Wagner, T/5 Harry Spletzer, his driver, and Cpl. Marty Sceithauer were crouching behind Lt. Cardone's tank to avoid a sudden artillery barrage when the driver, unaware that anyone was behind the tank, backed up, injuring the three men.

Mines Slow Advance

Stopped cold by the mines, the tankers and infantrymen waited for the engineers to come up and clear the field. While waiting for the engineers to arrive, the A Co., 47th, halftracks parked in a field less than 50 yards away from a German anti-tank gun, but after the German crew had looked over the situation, they decided to give up rather than fight. They came out to surrender to Capt. Daniel Wersma.

That afternoon Capt. Samuel Siegler sent two of his D Co. light tanks to investigate enemy movement to the right of the road. Sgt. Chester F. Gorzynski and Sgt. Frank C. Wach took their tanks over. As Gorzynski approached a house in the area, he fired a tentative machine gun burst and almost immediately a German officer and 20 men

came out, all carrying white cloths over their heads. Quickly another group of 20 appeared from the nearby woods, and then, as if on signal, Germans came pouring out of the woods and buildings from all sides. In 30 minutes the two light tanks had taken 175 prisoners.

The 1st Platoon of C Co., 22nd Engineers, arrived and worked throughout the night removing mines from the extensive field. S/Sgt. Paul Bragg and his three squad leaders, Sgt. Charles Nader, Sgt. Leslie Hager and Sgt. William Kestner, found the pattern for the field and they and their men went to work with ropes, pulling out the mines. It was a nervous, touchy job. The men never knew when a mine was booby-trapped and they worked hour after hour in the complete blackness clearing the field. German artillery boomed and pounded in the pine trees around them. By morning more than 400 mines had been removed. The engineers had done all they could to clear the way.

While the engineers were pulling out mines, an A Co. outpost guarded the engineers from infiltrating Germans. S/Sgt. Guido Borella, member of the outpost, had just been relieved from guard and had gone into a dugout when he heard the new guards call for help. Scrambling out of his dugout in the pitch black, he discovered that the Germans had infiltrated the outpost line in strength. A damaged tank which had hit a mine stood nearby. Borella climbed on to utilize the tank guns. He reached for the .50 caliber machine gun and found that the careful crew had removed the backplate to prevent the Germans from using it. Clambering down into the tank, he tried to fire the .30 caliber machine gun. Again the backplate was missing. Borella had never fired a 75 gun before, but he rammed a shell home in the chamber, pressed the trigger and nothing happened — the percussion mechanism had been removed.

Realizing the outpost was badly outnumbered, Borella and three other men started to the rear for help. Going to the company command post, he found Lt. Donald Hughes and told his story. By now it was almost daylight and Capt. Whitley had come to the infantry command post to say the attack was shoving off. The Anti-Tank Platoon followed closely to rescue the outnumbered outpost. When they arrived, they found five men had been carried away as prisoners and three lay wounded on the ground. Pfc. Richard Baer had escaped capture by feigning death after he had been knocked unconscious by a German grenade. He lay very still in the mud as the Germans milled around him, taking the prisoners and shooting those who tried to escape.

The attack on Brandenburg had jumped off at 0700 with C Co. of the 10th leading. Lt. Maguire rode the lead tank. He had gone only a few hundred yards toward Brandenburg when his tank hit a concealed mine. He jerked out his command radio, stopped Sgt. Rex Sterling's tank, second in the column, shoved his radio in and pushed on toward Brandenburg.

The Brandenburg assault was carefully planned. All firepower was used and Col. Hamberg later said it was one of the most perfectly timed attacks he had ever seen. As the C Co. tanks roared into town, shooting as they rolled, A Co. tanks and D Co. light tanks provided supporting fire. C Co. infantry closely followed the tanks and drove into the town to mop up. Tanks pulled up to buildings, blasted doors and windows with tank guns. Infantry boiled down into basements, digging out the Germans with hand grenades and small arms. By 1200 the town had been cleared and 75 prisoners had been taken. Casualties had again been high, and the wounded were evacuated in halftracks.

During the attack on Brandenburg, Lt. Kleinstein's 3rd Platoon of tanks had roared completely through the town and into the next town of Bergstein before he realized he had gone too far. The Germans were taken completely by surprise and not a shot was fired at him. Kleinstein hurriedly withdrew when he realized his mistake.

That night, Dec. 3, the C Cos. consolidated positions in Brandenburg. The married C Cos. were now commanded by Lt. Maguire and Lt. James Painter.

All day on Dec. 4 the companies stayed in Brandenburg under heavy artillery fire. German planes came in to strafe and drop butterfly bombs. The companies knocked down two of the planes.

The "Rubble Pile"

On the same day, Task Force Boyer, which had been in the Germeter area, was called on to help the 8th Infantry clear the "rubble pile," a name applied to the eastern tip of Vossenack. It was nothing more than a jumble of blown-down buildings, but the Germans had established a strong point there and already a battalion of the 8th Division infantry had worn itself out trying to clear the area.

The married B Cos. 2nd Platoons led the assault. Lt. Oliver Goldman and his infantrymen rode the rear decks of the tanks to avoid the heavy anti-personnel minefields. Tank mines stopped the tanks short of the rubble pile, and the infantry piled off and started toward the strong point. Lt. Goldman sent S/Sgt. Steven O'Connell to flank the rubble pile to the left. The remainder of the platoon, five men and Lt. Goldman, started toward the German positions.

Lt. McAuley brought his tanks into position to work over a German machine gun nest on the right flank. Lt. Goldman was called back to the battalion command post of the 8th Infantry. A colonel in command of the operation told him the rubble pile had to be taken by the next morning.

The area leading to the rubble pile was so heavily mined that the duck feet on the tanks pulled mines out of the ground as they moved. The tanks were forced to stop because of the mines. It was decided to attack the first thing in the morning.

The Goldman-McAuley married platoons assaulted the rubble pile at 0930 on the morning of Dec. 5, captured it and found it contained strong dugouts, a quantity of radio equipment and American guns. The married platoon then attacked the next objective, a strongly fortified German fire trench to the south of the rubble pile. With the tanks firing in support, the infantrymen drove into the fire trenches, reported them clear, and the assault force pulled back into Vossenack, its mission completed. Task Force Boyer continued on to Germeter, then followed Task Force Hamberg, that by now was readying an attack on Bergstein.

Before dawn on Dec. 5, Col. Hamberg sent a patrol from the 1st and 2nd Platoons of Lt. George W. Basquez's C Troop, 85th Recon, almost to the edge of Bergstein to check the road for mines and to locate enemy strong points. The 12-man patrol led by Lt. Max Eastman started at 0300, hugging the ditches, trying to avoid the mines and booby trap wires the Germans had laid. Sgt. Raymond Rupelli and Sgt. David Matha helped Lt. Eastman direct the patrol. Working silently, in complete darkness, sometimes crawling on all fours, the patrol reached the edge of Bergstein and heard enemy troops in the town. They found no mines or barbed wire entanglements on the road, and crawled slowly back to the command post in Brandengberg to make their report.

Col. Anderson's entire command was used for the assault on Bergstein. The order of attack was to be the married C Cos., A Cos., then B Cos.

The attack started with the infantry riding into the town on the rear decks of the tanks. The Germans had been waiting for the attack and laid such a tremendous barrage that the infantrymen were forced to leave the tanks and seek what cover they could find on the ground. Leading his company into Bergstein, Lt. Maguire was killed by a direct artillery hit on his tank. Lt. Painter was wounded and evacuated. Lt. Roy Hanf, the only remaining officer in C Co., 47th, took charge of the company. The married C Cos. ploughed into Bergstein, firing with every gun they had, then veered to the left edge of town.

The two platoon sergeants of the leading C Co. platoons were killed in the attack and their platoons were disorganized. Without hesitation Pfc. Bernard Gallagher and Cpl. David Lacoutere took over the platoons and continued to lead the attack. The pair were later promoted to staff sergeant and technical sergeant respectively.

The married A Cos. followed in the second assault wave. On the way in, a German 75 mm. anti-tank gun with a round in the chamber, ready to fire, was captured after heavy tank fire drove the crew away. As the A Co. infantry moved in to clean up the

German crew, an enemy officer rose out of his foxhole and raised his gun to fire on the advancing infantrymen. Pfc. Lester Aurand shot him squarely in the forehead before he could aim his gun.

Following A Co., the third assault wave of married B Cos. roared into Bergstein, Lt. George E. Flower's platoon leading. As they neared the town, Flower's platoon swung to the right to cover Lt. Cullin's platoon as it smashed into town. Sgt. Dominic Bernaco knocked out a German Mark IV tank which was trying to flee south out of Bergstein.

Lt. Goldman's C Co., 47th, platoon assaulted the first building in the town and dragged out 25 SS infantrymen found cringing in the basement. Goldman was checking the house for further Germans when an armor-piercing projectile whammed through the wall a few yards from where he was standing and went completely through the building. Then a second and a third projectile zoomed through the wall. All missed him. Sgt. Abe Kurnasky's B Co., 10th, tank pulled up to knock out the German gun, but his tank was knocked out and he was killed.

Into the town with the three married companies roared two platoons of C Co., 628th Tank Destroyers, commanded by Capt. Robert C. Jones, and Lt. Basquez's C Troop, 85th Recon.

CCR quickly outposted the town and waited for the inevitable counterattack. It came the next morning, and was the strongest the Germans had yet launched. During the night the men in Bergstein could hear the Germans warming up their tank motors outside the town and making other preparations to attack.

Counterattack

At 0530 the enemy laid down a tremendous artillery barrage and the attacking Germans came in almost under their own barrage. At least 500 German infantrymen swarmed into the town to hack away at the tired combat command.

The 628th Tank Destroyer men were ready for the German armor when it appeared. Sgt. Woodrow W. Woods' long 90 mm. gun picked off a Mark VI and a Mark V at 1000 yards, Sgt. Frank R. Balough accounted for two enemy tanks, a Mark V and a Mark IV, at 1200 yards, and Sgt. Charles A. Leo blasted one Mark IV only 175 yards from his tank destroyer.

The main weight of the attack was thrown on the married B Cos. which occupied the two southern prongs of the town. The Germans stumbled forward, stepping on their own dead and wounded to force the attack. T/5 Martin Johnson fired 15 clips from his smoking tommy gun to drive off the Germans in his section of town. S/Sgt. Jack Peterson fired his .50 caliber machine gun continuously until the attack subsided. By 1030, after more than four hours of constant siege, the attack was broken.

Virtually all of the men of CC R were in a state of shock. Their nerves were shot, their physical energy had long since disappeared. They crouched dazedly in their foxholes and basements, loading their guns and waiting for the Germans to come back. They knew they could never hold another counterattack like the last one. There simply wasn't enough men left. Every hour cost them more casualties, and the counter-attack had taken a heavy toll.

In the afternoon another counterattack came, but by this time the Germans were losing heart. The attack was small and was soon beaten back. More attacks were launched on the town, but the Germans never again seriously threatened. The men learned later why the Germans had attacked the town so furiously. The German High Command had offered the Knight's Cross of the German Iron Cross to any unit that retook Bergstein. But the German High Command never had to pay off.

At 0400 on the morning of Dec. 9 the weary, battered men were relieved in Bergstein and started to leave the town. The command had eight effective tanks left out of 58 which they started. Seventy infantrymen were available for full duty of an original strength of more than 750. It had been a costly fight.

